

Family Stories

by Pepi Patton Lovell

He knew that she had surely lost him. She had lost him to bad luck and gravity. And to the fact that he was a stupid jackass. He saw too that she knew.

She had been watching him climb up on high spots and out onto ledges. “Just gettin’ better views,” he’d said. She’d said the view was real good just where she was.

“Right here with your babies and your dinner.”

She had used one of her mother’s old quilts to make a pallet back in the shade away from the cliffs. At one end, baby Sis slept on her belly next to the picnic-basket. He could see yellow ruffles sticking up higher than the rest of her. Donnie had the other end of the quilt all scrunched up in humps and wrinkles, hills and valleys for tiny plastic Indians and unsuspecting cowboys.

Maybe she had been some put out with him, but she couldn’t have been over-worried. She had known that he was sure-footed, had known that he would come back to the quilt if Donnie started taking an interest in him

He couldn’t really think what had happened.

There was just too much tilt. He could not counter it. He could not set things right.

They had been, just that minute, looking at each other. Her hazel eyes had gone wide and then narrowed, tightened down on him without a blink. It had come to him that she was trying to hold him there and that such a look just might be strong enough to save a person. But then her pupils had closed to black pinpoints and her face gone white and smooth as marble. He could find no purchase.

He knew that she would never have quit on him if she could have helped it. He sure hadn’t meant to quit on her, just a pretty kid, really, perched on that rock next to his sleeping baby. He had meant to finish teaching her to drive. He had meant to finish . . . well, hell, everything.

All of this came to him in no time. In no words. And, somehow, opening up within the span of that same heartbeat was the memory of John’s footprint.

The story was about Mammy Williams—one of the best women on this earth as far as he could see, maker of the quilt where his baby slept, of fried apple pies he’d

meant to eat. It was about her being a young wife with three little children, about her seeing that group of men come up from the road and along the field. It was how she had known, right then, that those whistle blasts had been for John. It was how he'd finished his shift but gone back in for his dinner pail, how that piece of slag should have been supported, how she'd get not a dime from the mine. It was about her little girl staying hold of her skirt all day. Following her everywhere. Watching her take that empty bucket, turn it upside down, put it for a cover over that boot print in the barn.

He'd leave no boot print on this bald rock. There was no mud to press a foot into, no crevice for a toe hold, no branch within reach. There was nothing to grab onto. Absolutely nothing.

Just a twig. Sure not big enough to hold him. Coming out from somewhere; who knows where. Just one skinny shoot. One puny little sprig not strong enough to bear a newborn. But enough . . . somehow . . . who knows how . . . to break momentum. To give him a fraction of an instant. To let him bend forward, drop down, scramble, crab-like, up that rock.

By the time he could make himself stand up and walk toward her, she had already folded the quilt and tucked it under the picnic-basket handles. She was bent there, with Sis on her hip, helping Donnie put his little men into their metal box and snug down the lid.

He took Donnie by the hand, then, and picked up the basket. It was right that she had already closed it up. He couldn't have swallowed a bite. It wounded him to think how he had frightened her. The angry shame filled his stomach, closed his throat. He did not tell her that he was sorry. She did not need to hear it.

They wouldn't stop at the falls that day. But he would find a place for them to eat their picnic, a place with some tables and enough safe space for a little boy to run about. When he had set the basket on the table and she was busy putting Sis down on the quilt, he would get Donnie's attention. He would put a finger to his lips as he slipped one of the fried pies out of the basket. Donnie would put a finger to his own lips then. And, they would try to sneak away with their loot. She would catch them in the act, of course, just like she always did.

They would not talk about what had happened on those rocks.

They would speak of it to no one for forty-five years.

When they told me, it was by chance on a late summer drive somewhere near Cumberland Falls. He saw a spot up ahead, a widened place where a car could park and a trail led off through the trees. They had passed that same place many times over the years, but this time he would slow just a bit and say, "Well, there it is." Maybe she answered, "Yes."

They told me, then, because I asked. We never spoke of it again.

Now that they are gone, I remember. Within the span of a heartbeat, sometimes, it will all come to me. I will remember how sure-footed he was, how she watched him, how they both could know a thing without speaking of it. I remember, too, how they liked to tell family stories, but not this one. Not this story of Donnie playing, and me sleeping, and there being nothing that he could do to save himself, nothing at all.

I am moved beyond telling by the grace of that twig.